

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-10

INFO OCT-01 EUR-12 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-04 H-01
INR-07 L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 PRS-01 SP-02 SS-15
USIA-06 OMB-01 /069 W
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FM AMEMBASSY TUNIS
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 5846
INFO AMEMBASSY ALGIERS
AMEMBASSY PARIS
AMEMBASSY RABAT
AMEMBASSY ROME
AMEMBASSY TRIPOLI

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 TUNIS 1228

E.O.11652: GDS
TAGS: PINT TS
SUBJECT: PRESIDENT BOURGUIBA'S RETURN: ONE MONTH LATER

REF: TUNIS 0336; TUNIS 0379

1. SUMMARY: ONE MONTH AFTER HIS RETURN TO TUNIS FROM A THREE-MONTH TREATMENT/REST CURE IN GENEVA, PRESIDENT BOURGUIBA IS FAR FROM "IN A PERIOD OF CONVALESCENCE," WHICH HE ANNOUNCED TO A SHOCKED NATION HIS PHYSICIANS HAD IMPOSED. WHILE IT IS PROBABLE THE PRESIDENT IS LEAVING MOST DAY TO DAY AND EVEN MORE IMPORTANT DECISIONS TO PRIME MINISTER NOUIRA, HE HAS BEGUN TO RECEIVE AN INCREASING FLOW OF GOT OFFICIALS AND FOREIGN VISITORS, ALL OF WHICH IS DUTIFULLY AND PROMINENTLY REPORTED IN TUNISIAN MEDIA. THE SCENE HAS A CERTAIN "DEJA VU" ASPECT TO IT AND APPEARS TO BE CAREFULLY STAGED TO GIVE THE IMPRESSION THAT THE "COMBATTANT SUPREME" IS BACK IN FULL CONTROL. THIS SITUATION IS PERHAPS ONLY PARTLY CONTRIVED, AS BOURGUIBA IS APPARENTLY PHYSICALLY MUCH IMPROVED SINCE HIS RETURN
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ON JANUARY 14. A COMPULSIVE ACTIVIST, POSSESSING MONUMENTAL EGO, IT IS PROBABLY IMPOSSIBLE TO IMPOSE A STRICT REGIME OF "TOTAL REST" ON BOURGUIBA NOW THAT HE HAS RETURNED TO HIS NATIVE MILIEU AND HAS REGAINED SOME OF HIS STRENGTH. WE SUSPECT THAT FEW AROUND HIM HAVE REALLY TRIED, AS HE HAS RESTORED A SENSE OF NORMALCY WHICH SERVES THE INTERESTS OF ALL POLITICAL FORCES IN THE TUNISIAN SCENE. WHILE

BOURGUIBA STILL RETAINS THE PERSONAL POWER TO DISMISS THE PRIME MINISTER OR ANY OTHER MINISTER AT WILL, WE BELIEVE HE WILL CONTINUE TO REPLY INCREASINGLY ON "HIS SONS" TO SHOULDER THE MAIN BURDEN OF GOVERNMENT AND THAT HIS EFFECTIVE VOICE WILL BE PROGRESSIVELY REDUCED. INDIVIDUAL POLITICAL FIGURES MAY TRY TO USE HIM FOR THEIR ENDS, BUT NONE IS LIKELY TO CROSS HIM OR TO OVER-EXPOSE THEMSELVES TO ATTACKS BY THEIR PEERS AS LONG AS THE PRESIDENT IS IN CONTROL OF HIS FACULTIES AND STRENGTH--EVEN FOR LIMITED PERIODS. END SUMMARY.

2. SINCE HIS RETURN TO TUNIS ON JANUARY 14 AND HIS EMOTIONAL STATEMENT THAT HE WAS TOO TIRED TO GOVERN TUNISIA HIMSELF, PRESIDENT BOURGUIBA HAS SO FAR FAILED TO FOLLOW HIS PHYSICIANS' ADVICE OF "A PERIOD OF CONVALESCENCE", AND RATHER HE HAS ADOPTED A LIMITED WORK SCHEDULE THAT GIVES IMPRESSION OF HIS KEEPING IN TOUCH WITH AFFAIRS WHILE SPARING HIM THE PHYSICAL STRAIN OF GOVERNING. IN FACT, HIS SCHEDULE, WHILE STILL LIMITED, HAS BECOME INCREASINGLY ACTIVE. HE AVERAGES TWICE WEEKLY MEETINGS WITH PRIME MINISTER NOUIRA AND HAS BEEN REPORTED IN THE PRESS AS RECEIVING AN INNER CIRCLE OF GOT AND PSD LEADERS, INCLUDING INTERIOR MINISTER TAHAR BELKHODJA, FOREIGN MINISTER HABIB CHATTY, DEFENSE MINISTER ABDALLAH FARHAT, NATIONAL ASSEMBLY PRESIDENT SAKOK MOKADDEM AND CULTURE MINISTER CHEDLI KLIBI. ON ONE OCCASION HE MET WITH FULL CABINET, AN EVENT WHICH RECEIVED WIDE MEDIA COVERAGE. HE HAS ALSO RECEIVED SELECTED FOREIGN VISITORS INCLUDING ALGERIAN FOREIGN MINISTER ABDELAZIZ BOUTEFLIKA, PLO ENVOY ISSAM SARTAWI, CONFIDENTIAL

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MICHEL KHOURI, A SPECIAL ENVOY FROM LEBANESE PRESIDENT ELIAS SARKIS AND GHOLEM BARRAH, WHO CARRIED A PERSONAL MESSAGE FROM IVORY COAST PRESIDENT HOUPHOUET BOIGNY. HE ALSO RECENTLY RECEIVED CREDENTIALS FROM NEW AMBASSADORS OF ZAIRE AND ITALY AND PERSONALLY WELCOMED AT PALACE RAOUF M'HENNI FOLLOWING HIS RETURN FROM YEAR'S CAPTIVITY IN LIBYA.

3. ON THE OTHER HAND, BOURGUIBA HAS NOT PLAYED A VISIBLE ROLE IN SITUATION THAT IN BETTER DAYS WOULD HAVE FEATURED HIM AS THE MAIN ATTRACTION. MINISTERIAL LEVEL DELEGATIONS FROM TWENTY-EIGHT COUNTRIES (PLUS PLO) IN TUNIS FROM FEBRUARY 10-13 FOR THE EURO-ARAB DIALOGUE HAD NO CONTACT WITH TUNISIAN CHIEF OF STATE. BOURGUIBA HAS RECEIVED NO DOMESTIC OR FOREIGN CORRESPONDENTS. THE DESTOURIAN SOCIALIST PARTY CENTRAL COMMITTEE SHOULD HAVE HELD AN ANNUAL MEETING DURING JANUARY THAT WOULD HAVE NORMALLY INCLUDED SPEECHES BY THE PRESIDENT BUT THIS DID NOT TAKE PLACE. NO ONE HAS BEEN APPOINTED TO REPLACE CHEDLI KLIBI AS DIRECTOR OF THE

PRESIDENT'S OFFICE. THIS HAS BEEN TAKEN AS AN INDICATION THAT LESS WORK IS BEING DONE AT THE PALACE THAN DURING PAST YEAR, AND EVEN THEN IT WAS ALREADY CLEAR BOURGUIBA'S REAL INVOLVEMENT WITH DAY-TO-DAY GOVERNMENTAL DECISIONS WAS CONSISTENTLY BEING REDUCED. FINALLY, BOURGUIBA HAS MADE NO APPEARANCES IN PUBLIC SINCE RETURNING TO TUNIS AND HAS DELIVERED NO SPEECHES.

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 2 OF 2 TUNIS 1228

4. BOURGUIBA'S PHYSICAL APPEARANCE IN TELEVISION NEWS-CLIPS OF HIS MEETINGS HAS IMPROVED NOTICEABLY FROM THE GRIM SCENE DURING HIS ARRIVAL IN TUNIS LAST MONTH. HE WAS SHOWN IN ANIMATED CONVERSATION WITH LEBANESE ENVOY KHOURI AND THE ITALIAN AMBASSADOR, WHO PRESENTED CREDENTIALS ON FEBRUARY 4, FOUND THE PRESIDENT TO BE IN GOOD CONDITION AND COMPLETELY LUCID. THIS IMPROVEMENT IS PROBABLY DUE TO CONTINUED MEDICAL ATTENTION, A VERY LIGHT WORK LOAD AND THE PSYCHOLOGICAL LIFT HE MUST HAVE GOTTEN FROM BEING AT HOME, CLOSE TO FRIENDS AND IN TOUCH WITH AFFAIRS OF STATE.

5. APPARENT IMPROVEMENT OF BOURGUIBA'S PHYSICAL CONDITION, EVEN AS FRAGILE AS THIS MAY BE, AND HIS BROADLY PUBLICIZED INVOLVEMENT IN AFFAIRS OF STATE HAVE HAD CALMING EFFECT ON TUNISIAN POLITICAL SCENE. ALTHOUGH HE IS RECEIVING GOT MINISTERS AND FOREIGN VISITORS, WE JUDGE THAT THE REAL WORK OF GOVERNMENT IS BEING DONE IN THE PRIME MINISTER'S

OFFICE AND TO LESSER EXTENT IN INTERIOR MINISTER BELKHODJA'S
OFFICE. NEVERTHELESS, THE MERE PRESENCE OF THE COMBATTANT
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SUPREME AGAIN AT HELM HAS BEEN WELL RECEIVED BY POPULATION
ACCUSTOMED TO BOURGUIBA'S FIRM LEADERSHIP, AND A COMFORTING
SENSE OF CALM HAS BEEN DRAWN FROM THIS FACT. AS THE COUNTRY
HAD BECOME INCREASINGLY EDGY DURING THE UNCERTAINTY OF THE
PRESIDENT'S LONG ABSENCE IN SWITZERLAND, THE IMPRESSION OF
RESTORED NORMALCY HAS BEEN USEFUL TO NOUIRA AND OTHER
ESTABLISHMENT FIGURES WHO HAVE A DIRECT STAKE IN CONTINUITY
OF THINGS AS THEY HAVE BEEN. CHIEF BENEFACITOR OF THIS HAS
BEEN NOUIRA, HOWEVER, WHOSE MEETINGS WITH THE PRESIDENT HAVE
BEEN PROMINENTLY DISPLAYED IN LOCAL MEDIA WITH THE DIRECT
IMPLICATION OF "COMPLETE PRESIDENTIAL CONFIDENCE."
BELKHODJA HAS ALSO SHARED IN THE BOURGUIBA LIMELIGHT,
ESPECIALLY FOR THIS ROLE IN OBTAINING M'HENNI'S RETURN
FROM LIBYA. OFFICIAL LINE THAT THE PRESIDENT IS RETURNED
AND THAT ALL IS WELL HAS A DEFINITE "DEJA VU" ASPECT,
ALTHOUGH MOST AWARE TUNISIANS HAVE DEEP DOUBTS ABOUT REALITY
OF APPEARANCES AND HOW LONG THEY CAN BE MAINTAINED.

6. CHARACTERISTIC OF THE MANNER IN WHICH BOURGUIBA'S NEW
ROLE HAS BEEN ACCEPTED, HOWEVER, NO ONE REALLY SEEMS TO
EXPECT HIM TO RUN COUNTRY SINGLEHANDEDLY AS HE USED TO DO.
RATHER MOST PEOPLE APPEAR TO BE GENUINELY GLAD HE DID NOT
RETURN HOME IN WORSE CONDITION, AS WAS FEARED, AND THERE IS NO
DESIRE TO ASK MORE OF THIS OLD AND REVERED MAN THAN HE CAN
POSSIBLY GIVE.

7. IT IS DIFFICULT TO SAY WITH CERTAINTY HOW WELL
BOURGUIBA IS OR WHAT ROLE HE IS REALLY PLAYING IN
GOVERNMENTAL DECISIONS, AS TUNISIANS WITH DIRECT KNOWLEDGE
ARE AS USUAL KEEPING EXTREMELY CLOSE-LIPPED. ANY CHANGE
IN THE PATTERN ESTABLISHED OVER THE LAST MONTH, HOWEVER,
WOULD SIGNAL A DECISION BY THE PRESIDENT THAT HE HAS
IMPROVED ENOUGH TO REASSUME A GREATER GOVERNING ROLE, OR
THAT HE MUST ACCEPT A LESSER ONE. SIGNALS TO WATCH FOR
IN THIS REGARD WOULD BE APPOINTMENT OF A DIRECTOR FOR
BOURGUIBA'S OFFICE AND THE PART BOURGUIBA PLAYS IN THE CELEBRATION
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OF THE PROPHET'S BIRTHDAY ON MARCH 2 WHEN THE PRESIDENT HAS
TRADITIONALLY ATTENDED CEREMONIES IN KAIROUAN AND MADE A
PUBLIC ADDRESS. CONVERSELY, GREATER ISOLATION OF THE
PRESIDENT FROM ALL BUT HIS INNER CIRCLE WOULD INDICATE THAT

AN AGING BOURGUIBA RECOGNIZES HE IS NOT UP TO THE DEMANDS
OF EVEN PRETENDING THAT HE IS STILL IN FULL CHARGE.

8. OUR JUDGMENT IS THAT AS LONG AS BOURGUIBA IS IN CONTROL
OF HIS FACULTIES AND HIS STRENGTH--EVEN FOR LIMITED PERIODS--H
NOUIRA WILL REMAIN THE MAN ON TOP. NO ONE, INCLUDING
NOUIRA, WILL HAVE COMPLETE FREEDM OF ACTION AS LONG AS THE
PRESIDENT HAS A RATIONAL BREATH IN HIM AND AS LONG AS HE
POSSESSES THE POWER TO DISMISS ANY OF THEM AT WILL.
THERE ARE MANY AMBITIOUS MEN AROUND AND THEY ALL KNOW THEIR
PEERS COULD POSSIBLY GET THE PRESIDENT'S EAR IF THEY
OVERSTEPPD THEIR LIMITS. WE SUSPECT THEY WILL ALL BE
VERY CAREFUL NOT TO GIVE POTENTIAL RIVALS THIS AMMUNITION
AND THAT THEY WILL NOT DARE OPEN THEMSELVES TO THE OLD
MAN'S WRATH. WE SUSPECT THAT BOURGUIBA KNOWS THIS TOO.
MULCAHY

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